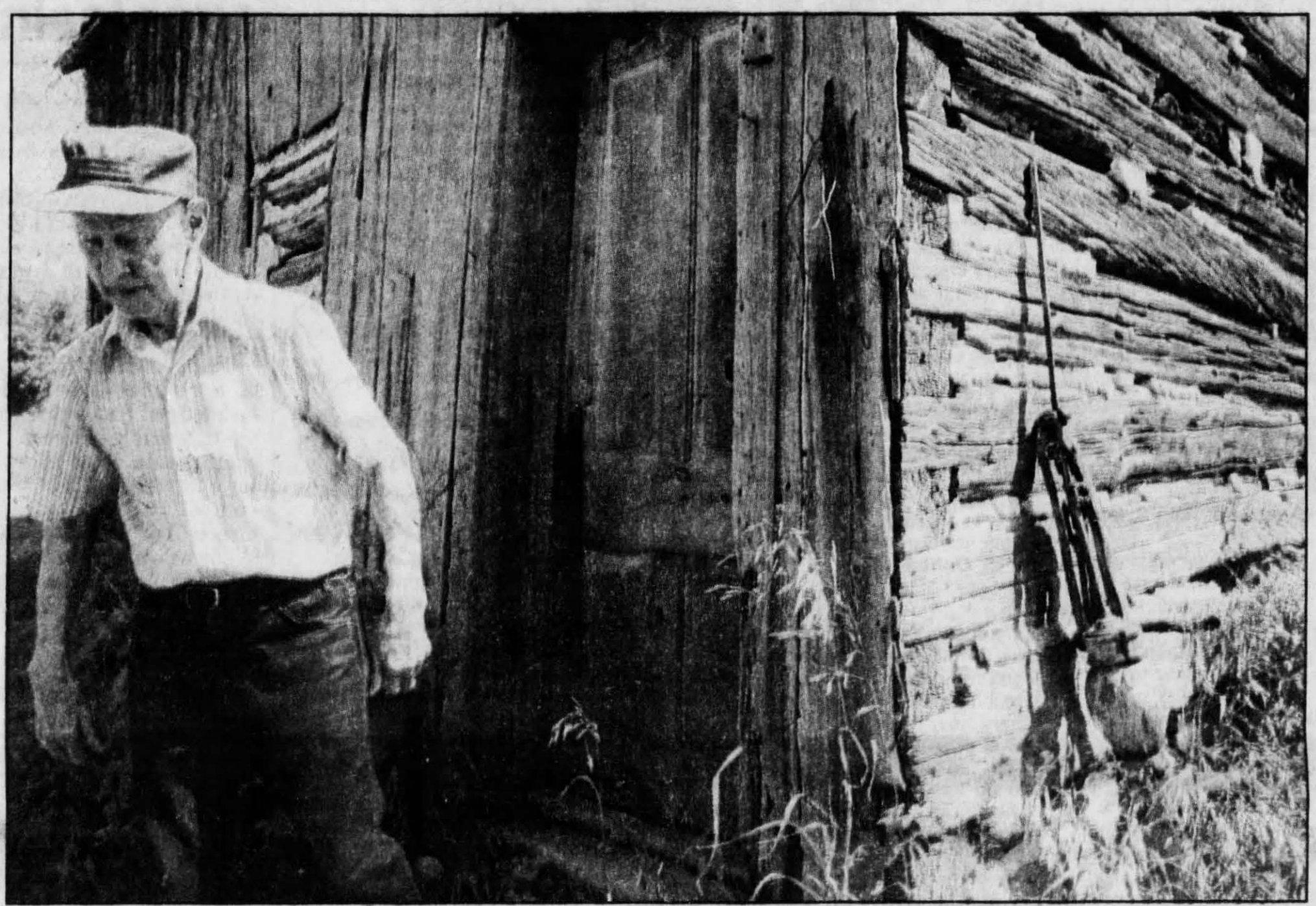


Frontier cabin: Walter Dalebroux of Thiry Daems walks away from a shed that once was a chicken coop. Originally, it was the log cabin of Constant and Amelia Thiry, who built it in 1857.

Church unites Thiry Daems

There from start, St. Odile thrives

By Karil Van Boxel
Press-Gazette

THIRY DAEMS — Constant and Amelia Thiry bought 80 acres of swampland from the state of Wisconsin on July 10, 1857.

The price was 50 cents an acre.

The purchase gave birth to Thiry Daems — an unincorporated community about 3 miles north of Luxemburg in Kewaunee County.

Unlike some speculation, the Daems portion of the name is not "dames" misspelled. It is attributed to the Rev. Daems, the first parish priest at St. Odile Catholic Church.

Press-Gazette photos by Sandee Gerbers

Walter Dalebroux, 77, Route 2, Luxemburg, the oldest resident of Thiry Daems proper, knows all about the Thirys. Dalebroux's parents, Ernest and Celina, bought the Thirys' 16-by-20-foot log cabin on March 11, 1907.

The cabin, built mostly of cedar logs, remains intact on Dalebroux's farm. Converted to a chicken coop after his father built the present farmhouse in 1918, it contains the family's first corn planter and other antique tools.

Dalebroux is a walking history book on Thiry Daems. He recalls the main street as it was 60 years ago with a store, tavern, dance hall, cheese factory, blacksmith, mechanic's garage and feed mill.

Now with the only tavern and a mobile home on the market, Dalebroux says half of Thiry Daems is for sale. He laments the changes.

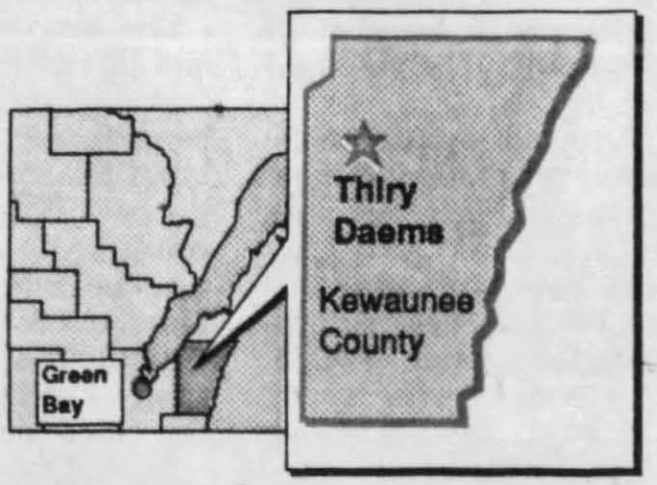
"Those young kids can't speak Belgian anymore," he said. "There's nobody to talk to."

Across Thiry Daems Road is another Dalebroux farm, this one owned by Gene and Joan, no relation to Walter.

When the home was new in 1949, Gene's parents shared it with three other families and a store after a dance hall

Please see **Community/B-2**

Friendly fox: Mike Ehrens shows some of his work, including a fox that he mounted in his Northwind Taxidermy Studio in Thiry Daems.



Church helpers: Joan and Gene Dalebroux stand in St. Odile Catholic Church. They are active members of the church, as are many people who live in the Thiry Daems area.

and living quarters next door burned.

Gene, 54, took over the dairy farm from his parents, Goldie and Stella, 17 years ago. His son, Paul, who helps on the farm, lives with his wife, Jill, and two sons in a new home down the block on Thiry Daems Road.

Gene has watched the Belgian-Catholic farming community change over the years. "Life is a lot faster pace, even on a farm," he said.

What hasn't changed is the closeness of the St. Odile Church community.

The first church burned in 1911 but was rebuilt at its present location on Thiry Daems Road in 1914. One priest serves the parish of 83 families and three other area churches.

"If anything has to be done in the church, everyone rallies and helps," says Joan Dalebroux, who sets up for Mass each Sunday.

More than 20 families will participate in the annual Thiry Daems block party on Aug. 19 at the church. A kermis will be on the first Sunday in October. But this year, the people won't be able to walk across Thiry Daems Road to Still Willie's tavern after Mass.

The bar has been locked up since April. Owners Donna and Robert Williquette, Thiry Daems Road, want to sell after putting 25 years into the operation.

"I love people. That's why I was in this bar for so many years," said Donna Williquette, 58. "Now older people are scared to go out and drink because of the drunk driving law."

Mike Ehrens, Thiry Daems Road, who operates Northwind Taxidermy Studio, is a newcomer. He moved from Sheboygan Falls six years ago, joining two brothers who are area teachers.

His house across from the church contains a menagerie of fish, birds and animals. A journeyman machinist by trade, Ehrens, 37, is a hunter and outdoorsman who works full time at Algoma Hardwoods, Algoma.

"I don't foresee it ever becoming full time," he said of his taxidermy trade. "The people won't pay the price."

Thiry Daems file

☐ **Population:** 15 in Thiry Daems proper. The unincorporated community takes in 1 square mile.

☐ **Flavor:** Thiry Daems is composed of old farms and some new homes. A local welder still makes many of his own tools.

The Thiry Daems Cheese Factory moved up County Highway A to Frog Station. Fires claimed Washington Grade School and past businesses, including a store-tavern-dance hall.

☐ **Church:** Many Thiry Daems residents are members of St. Odile parish, the focal point of the community.

The chancel contains a picture of a Belgian girl holding a book with eyes. Parishioners didn't understand the symbolism until they learned that St. Odile was blind.

☐ **Heritage:** Like many nearby hamlets, Thiry Daems was settled by Belgians. People from Belgium have visited the small log cabin built in 1857 by the community's founders, the Thiry family.

■ **Next week:** Institute in Door County